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AUTHOR Hearn, Norman E.
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ABSTRACT

Cultural biases about rural schools and people have influenced rural education, public policies, and distribution of funds away from areas where they are most needed. Policymakers have regarded the rural school's condition (sparsity, isolation, smallness, limited economic base) in negative terms, resulting in public policies that ignored, neglected, or eliminated rural schools. Policy makers have arranged priorities by numbers, by which rural schools appear less cost-effective and are ineligible for grants. Additionally, the 11,000 local education agencies (LEAs) with enrollment under 1500 may not have received information about financial opportunities, technical assistance, promising research, and successful practices because grants and assistance agencies felt it was not feasible to notify so many. Small and rural LEAs often lack financial ability to make commitments for "matching funds," "full-time staff," or "short-term phase-in" which may be given special consideration in funding. Specifications for grants may be so complex that school administrators may be intimidated from applying. Additionally, rural schools may be in communities too homogeneous to qualify for some grants or may lack personnel who can be committed to projects without sharing other duties. Finally, experts who evaluate proposals often represent large, prestigious institutions that are likely to be out of touch and out of sympathy with rural America. (AW)

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The Roots of Rural Educational Inequity- or How Country Folks Get Whipsawed and Bushwhacked*

Rural folks have borne the indignities of "hick", "bumpkin", "red-neck" and other such name-calling and stereotyping since time immemorial. Even the dictionary carries the message. City means "civilized"; urban means "urbane" or "sophisticated". Rural has always meant "crude" or "peasant". Country implies "uncultured" as in "Hee-Haw" and "Let's- all- laugh- at- them." Most rural people respond to such ridicule good-naturedly and without rancor.

But this historic baggage of biases has influenced our thinking about rural education and our public policies regarding rural schooling with some serious consequences. As Paul Nachtigal points out in Improving Rural Schools, policy makers regard the "reality" of the rural schools condition - sparsity, isolation, smallness and limited economic base - in negative terms. This bias has led to public policies that either ignore them, neglect them or stamp them out. The evidence is monumental that this is exactly what has happened. During the past 75 years small schools everywhere were turned into storage sheds or antique barns, and rural children, in the name of reform, were hauled out of their home communities to larger urban centers.

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*By Norman E. Hearn, Ed.D., Senior Policy Analyst, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, United States Education Department, October 13, 1981.

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But we need not point accusing fingers at some ambiguous 'they" as in "They-did-it-to-us." As in Pogo, "we" is "us". The fact is that those who molded and enforced rural education policies during the past 75 years came from rural schools. The leaders of the school consolidation movement, for example, were country born and reared. Neither can we escape the fact that we taught ourselves that we were somehow inferior, that we must put country ways behind us and camouflage the nature of our rural birth with a gloss of erudition. Only recently as cities began to groan under their burden of large numbers and deteriorating environments has it become "chic" to even confess our rural heritage. We may even brag a bit about our good fortune, though we know that past bias and resultant inequity have hurt us and our children.

It is obvious that the tap root of rural educational inequity is a cultural prejudice but the off shoots are not nearly as conspicious. It is my purpose to expose as many of these roots and offshoots as possible in the nope that future public policies will not penalize rural areas and thus rural children and adults.

One basic source of anti rural bias is the "big-is-better" syndrome. The American preoccupation with bigness - tall buildings, big crowds, mass markets - has caused policy makers to arrange their priorities by the numbers rather than by the intensity of the human need.

The criticalness of a problem becomes a function of the degree of concentration of students. This works against rural areas in two ways: (1) a large quantity of learners becomes a pre condition for a quality curriculum, and (2) a large concentration of non-learners constitutes a more serious problem than a similar number of dispersed non-learners (underachievers and dropouts, for example). When translated into grants-making policy this means that agencies will give more rating points for such concentrations, thereby penalizing rural areas because of dispersion. Rural and small schools lose on at least two counts:(1) they don't have large numbers of pupils, and therefore in any competition with populous schools they appear less cost effective and (2) guidelines and the laws for formula-grant allocations often specify a minimum number of pupils before an LEA is eligible for a share of the monies - cutting them off at the pass, so to speak.

Ironically, the large number of LEAs works against rural areas when it comes to sharing information and receiving assistance. A common exclamation is:"There are too damn many of them". (11,000 LEAs are under 1500 enrollment). Unabashedly, agency personnel preparing mailing lists or assistance schedules will state that it is not feasible to notify so many.

Small rural schools are expected to find out about financial opportunities, technical assistance or promising research and successful practices through some kind of telepathy or hearsay network; or they are to read some expensive and obscure publication, such as The Commerce Business Daily or the Federal Register.

Another curious thing happens to rural areas when legislators sit down to design a formula for distributing public monies. Though obviously it would cost more to provide a really quality education for the rural disadvantaged child in small and isolated schools, when it comes to distributing funds to States to help these same kids, the per-pupil expenditure (PPE) gets cranked in to the formula as if PPE were the real cost of a truly quality education. A rural State gets less per child because it "costs less" than a higher cost State. In this way policy makers and legislators blithely perpetuate the poverty-level education of less affluent areas under the guise of administering programs designed to address the causes of inequality. Schools that have spent less (because they can't afford it) get less because they didn't have it to spend.

Another manifestation of a subtle bias that causes unintented harm is the habit of policy makers and grants administrators to favor a "commitment" by the local educational agency when deciding whom shall be funded. Surrogates for this commitment are usually "matching funds" or "full-time staff" or "short-term phase-in". Though the objective of encouraging local continuation or adoption by such commitment is commendable, the side effect is to exclude the small and rural LEAs that lack financial ability to make such a commitment. Self exclusion by LEAs often takes place up front before the application. Or, if application is made, the funding agency excludes LEAs during the proposal review process when this "commitment factor" is given special weight in the funding decision. This is a case where a noble program purpose subverts a basic intent of the program, such as serving the most needy.

Good intentions also mask the root cause of one of the most serious forms of discrimination by government and private funding agencies. That is found in the national mania to achieve pseudo sophistication for an otherwise simple process of grants making by aping the jargon of the research and management sciences fields. Specifications for project applications often read like a foreign language text. This practice has intimidated the harried school administrators from even walking onto the field of competition for grants.

The avowed purpose of requiring comprehensive needs assessments, measurable objectives, elaborate research designs, valid and reliable instrumentation, PERT and Gannt charts, significance tests and other such technical provisions is to ensure a well-constructed and well executed project and program. But the larger unintended effect of these requirements often is to skew the outcome of the program from that of meeting pupil needs to that of serving the information and professional growth needs of researchers and administrators. It has been said that there is an inverse ratio between ability to get a grant and the need for a grant. As grantsmanship is so rewarded, small school administrators who have little time for such falderal because they may be driving buses, or counting lunch money will continue to lose. The capability to master the grants process becomes more important than the need, capability and motivation to serve children.

The most subtle but effective way that small and rural schools are penalized in the grants-awarding process is through the imposition of common criteria for rating proposals and applications. A few examples of the most widely used criteria illustrate the built-in bias.

Typically a "Plan of Operation" criterion awards points for a "clear description of how the applicant will provide equal access and treatment of the traditionally under-represented, including minorities, women, elderly and handicapped". Rural communities are often homogenous and have few or no minorities; womens' roles are traditional; the elderly are usually occupied; and the handicapped are dispersed - all enough to not only make a plan futile, but to discourage applicants even before they lose on points.

The "quality of key personnel" criterion, on the surface, would seem to be a fairly objective criterion; but rural schools are immediately at a severe disadvantage because of low pay and the isolation factor which makes recruitment and retention of highly qualified personnel difficult. Raters of proposals usually consider degrees and years of experience as quality points, both standards not usually found in rural areas.

Even more inappropriate is the commonly used "time-committed-to-job" standard. Rural personnel are notorious for their many occupational hats - drivers, part-time teachers, business managers, etc. It is unlikely that a small rural school could tolerate personnel devoting fulltime to one job. Furthermore, it presents an awkward personnel situation when a full-time State or Federal project director is prohibited by audit threats from sharing routine duties with regular personnel.

The almost universal inclusion of a "budget-and-cost-effective" criterion is especially detrimental to small and rural schools. Cost effectivenss is usually determined by looking at a quotient derived by dividing the number of pupils into total dollars. If the LEA designs a comprehensive quality program their ratio will be bad because a quality education for a small number of pupils requires a basic minimum number of teachers and the same number of library books as a larger school. If the LEA attempts to lower costs by skimping on salaries, for example, they will likely score lower on the "quality-of-personnel" criterion. Small schools get bushwhacked and whipsawed."

But rural schools really get bushwhacked and whipsawed on the ubiquitous evaluation criterion. Not only are they not likely to have personnel who can design a sophisticated evaluation plan, they usually do not have a grant large enough to allow sufficient funds for an evaluation. A typical rural project of about $10,000 would be allowed by usual guidelines (5-10%) about $500-$1,000 for evaluation - hardly enough for a valid design and certainly not enough to win many points in any competition with larger projects. And technical assistance help is usually far away and far too expensive.

This entire traversty is reinforced by a common public and private agency practice of hiring experts to read and rate applications and grant proposals. These experts are usually researchers and writers - the very people who originate and perpetuate the system. Not only are the readers usually from academe; they are most often from the few commonly recognized large and prestigous institutions that are likely to be out of touch and out of sympathy with rural America. Seldom are persons fresh from the classroom or school board rooms, particularly of rural or small schools, asked to comment on the quality or reality of the proposals. As a result, much of what is funded is irrelevant for small and rural practitioners and, as time goes on, the grants-making process becomes further encumbered with more and more research and management sciences rhetoric. If this trend is unchecked, it will take the entire grants process into an esoteric orbit that will put public monies completely out of reach of the most needy, particularly those in small and rural schools.

It is risky to attack this system for fear of being dubbed as anti-intellectual and unsophiscated. But rural and small school advocates must not be intimidated. They should make it clear that they are not indicting the entire social and management science fields; but rather they are objecting to the inappropriate and unbalanced application of theoretical principles to a process that makes if difficult for small, rural and usually poor LEAs to participate.

No one will seriously argue with the need for clear objectives, good management, and solid evidence of success. But they can ask that while striving for these noble goals, policy makers not put undue stress on improving the process to the detriment of meeting real needs. Or to put it positively; the grants process must emphasize need, creativity and sincerity, and must put greater trust in the integrity of those who serve children. As this occurs, not only are rural areas more likely to receive a fair share of Federal, State, and private funds and services, but all pupils- regardless of place of residence - will benefit from educational programs closer to the reality of everyday classroom learning.